

Lapin Kansa

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One of the pleasures of being the U.S. Ambassador is the opportunity I have had to travel throughout beautiful Finland. I have journeyed to nearly every part of the country, including multiple visits into Lapland. What strikes me most about Lapland is that, as many times as I have been there, I always have a different experience, one that reveals new, previously hidden treasures. I have found that there is a disparity between what comes to mind when one thinks of Lapland and what one finds upon a visit. Of course, what I expected is there in wonderful abundance : winter tourism, reindeer, dog

sleds and snow-mobiles, winter cottages with warm saunas nestled in snow beneath the glowing Northern Lights. It is all there.

Lapland is far more than its stereotypes. It is a complex, culturally rich area with a strong business community, high-tech industries, a thriving IT sector, and high quality universities. A broad range of business and economic opportunities wait just beyond the spectrum of astonishing beauty - the magnificent white-night summers, the vibrancy of the fall colors, the variety and richness of the berries and vegetation, and the clarity of air and sky.

In Lapland, as in Finland generally, it is the relationship of citizens with their natural surroundings that creates the unique “essence” of the country. Finns are connected to nature in a way that feels built into their DNA. This connection has had a profound cultural impact on the way Finns interact with the world. It is this connection that makes Finland special.

When we look around the world we see a lot of dissonance, much of which comes when people are disconnected from their natural world. It is a challenge to find one’s way back, to reconnect with what we are missing. But the Finnish bond with nature has had a profound social impact, nurturing a Nordic “right-mindedness” that many in the world have lost. In an overworked world, Finns have held close to the rhythms of the earth, through sauna, skiing, or summer houses on a lake, in a way that gives balance to their lives.

This connection is what Finland has to offer to the outsider, whether it is a tourist coming through for a short visit, a business investor looking to find the “next great thing,” or an Ambassador who spends a few years here. It gives us a glimpse of what we have forgotten. We can re-establish a foundation in the basics of what makes our work, and our lives, so important. Finland offers to its visitors not just awe-inspiring beauty, but a genuine philosophical connection with nature, a salve for the soul battered by the fast pace and discord of modern life.

No matter that Finland’s frame of reference is well-grounded and right-minded, the world is a hectic and ever-evolving place. How Finland chooses to address growing global challenges, how it will adapt to a transforming world, how it will remain agile and quick, are challenges for Finland.

Just as Finland offers a fresh new perspective to its visitors, so too do Finland’s leaders bring essential perspectives to their interactions on the global stage. Whether in international business dealings or in partnership with international organizations, Finns bring a viewpoint that is valued and an opinion that is respected. In survey after survey, Finland ranks at the top in education, transparency, ease of doing business, quality of life, and citizen satisfaction. However, as President Niinistö said in his first New Year’s message a few weeks ago, in this age of unrelenting change, resting on today’s successes is not a plan for the future.

Are Finns willing to take the risks and chances necessary to create success? How will Finland’s political and business leaders foster a culture where this is possible without losing sight of the grounding and connection to nature that is part and parcel of the Finnish spirit? These are questions I pose, and I look forward to the conversation they will bring.

Although I have had the luxury of slowly uncovering the hidden treasures of Finland, Finns cannot wait for others to come to understand what you have to share. The sound that you can hear as the Northern Lights flash overhead in Lapland is the voice of the future. Those who ignore it do so at their own peril.